



By Cameron Buettel

We live in an age that demands short bursts of rapid-fire information. The day is fast approaching—perhaps it's already here—when the number of social media followers will hold the preeminent place on a pastor's resume. Sermon lengths are going the way of our shrinking attention spans. Modern pastors are tempted to replace exegesis and exposition with sound bite sermons and slogan theology.

But Bible verses are not slogans or sound bites. They are eternal truths that find their meaning within the overall story God is telling. Uprooting a verse, or even a biblical phrase, from its native habitat can lead to all kinds of mayhem. That is especially the case when, independent of their proper context, verses are enlisted as the supporting cast for someone's opinion or agenda. **Romans 2:4** is one verse that is regularly misused that way—carelessly sprinkled into sermons, interviews, and social media.

Joel Osteen uses **Romans 2:4** to defend his feel-good messages:

“Listen, don't dangle people over the fires of hell. . . . Listen, that doesn't draw people to God. They know what kind of life they live. They know how bad they've lived. What you've got to do is talk about the goodness of God. Listen, it's the goodness of God that brings people to repentance.”

Joel Osteen may think that people know they are sinners and that we therefore don't need to warn them or preach about it, but does **Romans 2:4** really back up his point?

Moreover, is his point biblical at all? Just as prisons are full of convicts who will proclaim their innocence, Scripture is clear that sinners reject the guilt of their sin. As Solomon explained, “Every man's way is right in his own eyes” (**Proverbs 21:2**). And even those who do acknowledge their sin have little grasp of the depth of their wretchedness, or the eternal cost of their transgressions.

In fact, it's ironic that Osteen would use [Romans 2:4](#) to excuse themselves from discussing sin and the need for repentance, since that verse is plucked from Scripture's most profound discourse on man's depravity.

Romans 1–3 is undeniable proof that Paul began his exposition of the gospel by first addressing the universality of sin and the justness of God's wrath against sin. John MacArthur points this out:

“The biblical order in any gospel presentation is always first the warning of danger and then the way of escape, first the judgment on sin and then the means of pardon, first the message of condemnation and then the offer of forgiveness, first the bad news of guilt and then the good news of grace. The whole message and purpose of the loving, redeeming grace of God offering eternal life through Jesus Christ rests upon the reality of man's universal guilt of abandoning God and thereby being under His sentence of eternal condemnation and death. Consistent with that approach, the main body of Romans begins with 1:18, a clear affirmation of God's wrath “against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.””

It is actually our guilt and the justness of God's wrath that provide the all-important context for [Romans 2:4](#):

And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God. ([Romans 2:2-5](#))

Now you can see why [Romans 2:4](#) is so frequently divorced from its context, and why it's usually paraphrased instead of quoted. In the full context of Paul's writing we see clearly what he means by God's goodness—it is “the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience.” And [Romans 2:2-3](#) explains how God demonstrates that tolerance and patience—by withholding the wrath we deserve. God's goodness is the reality that we have not yet experienced His judgment. MacArthur adds:

“Forbearance [tolerance] comes from *anochē*, which means “to hold back,” as of judgment. It was sometimes used to designate a truce, which involves cessation of hostilities between warring parties. God's forbearance with mankind is a kind of temporary divine truce He has graciously proclaimed. Patience translates *makrothumia*, which was sometimes used of a powerful ruler who voluntarily withheld vengeance on an enemy or punishment of a criminal. Until the inevitable moment of judgment, God's kindness and forbearance and patience are extended to all mankind.”

It is impossible to preach the goodness of God without talking about sin and judgment because its very meaning is bound up in those terms. When we see our sinfulness and rebellion against God, and when we see our hypocrisy in condemning others for committing the same wrath-deserving sins, then we can also marvel at God's goodness in patiently and tolerantly withholding the wrath that we deserve.

That is what leads us to repentance. And it is entirely consistent with what Paul taught elsewhere in Scripture:

I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death. (2 Corinthians 7:9-10)

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